

Top Secret



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CONTENTS

Cambodia: The country faces some difficult and uncertain days. (Page 1)

Cambodia: The country faces some difficult and uncertain days following the move against Sihanouk.

Circumstances surrounding the dismissal of Sihanouk as chief of state indicate that the government took some pains to use constitutional means to oust him, probably to avert any internal criticism that it had acted irresponsibly. There are no indications of any opposition to the move in Cambodia, although some security precautions apparently have been taken in Phnom Penh by the government as an insurance measure.

The government has stated that a popular election will be held to select a permanent successor to Sihanouk, but no date has been set and it remains to be seen just how sincere its intentions are in this respect.

The decision to move decisively at this time represents a swift reversal of the government's previous policy of attacking Sihanouk's power gradually. The leaders of the anti-Sihanouk forces apparently felt they had to act before Sihanouk returned to Cambodia next week.

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25X1 Both Lon Nol and Deputy Prime Minister Matak, who appears to be the driving force behind recent events, probably calculated that the support they were enjoying from the National Assembly, key army commanders, and other important elements might not hold together in the face of a Sihanouk counter-move.

On foreign policy matters, the government announced it will maintain strict neutrality. This point was conveyed privately to the US chargé in Phnom Penh when he was summoned by a senior army officer several hours before the assembly's move against Sihanouk. The officer assured the chargé that despite any rumors to the contrary, the government would not change its policy of neutrality. [The foreign ministry officially affirmed this point in a note delivered to the chargé late yesterday.]

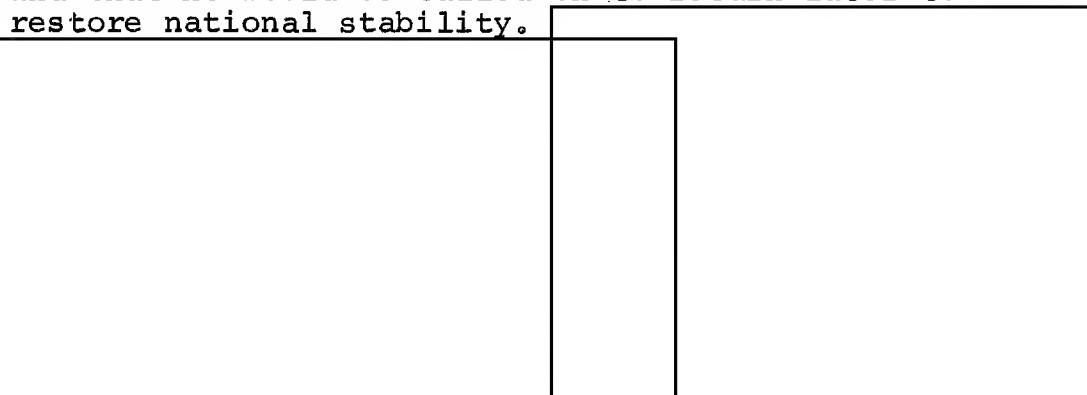
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Sihanouk has yet to be heard from or possibly reckoned with. [He arrived in Peking from Moscow on 18 March.] He long has claimed he would surrender his power if that is what the people wanted. But in view of the support the government apparently enjoys now, and in view of the evident determination of its leaders to bury him politically, he would face a tough road if he returns at this time--presuming the government would allow him to do so. He may decide it would be more prudent to stay away for now in hopes that the government eventually will falter, and that he would be called on to return later to restore national stability.

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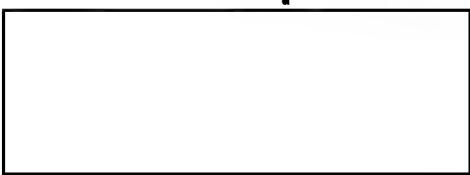
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